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Friday, 9 March 2001, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Holkeri ..... (Finland)

The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Agenda item 122 *(continued)*

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations

The President: I should like to inform members that Congo has made the necessary payment to reduce its arrears below the amount specified in Article 19 of the Charter.

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of this information?

It was so decided.

The President: This information will be reflected in an addendum to document A/55/745.

Agenda item 46 (*continued*)

The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Draft resolution (A/55/L.79)

The President: I call on the representative of Germany to introduce draft resolution A/55/L.79.

Mr. Kastrup (Germany): Thank you very much, Mr. President, for following your usual procedure of starting on time.

When I introduced the traditional annual draft resolution on the situation in Afghanistan only two and a half months ago, I certainly did not expect to introduce another draft resolution on Afghanistan so soon. However, recent developments in Afghanistan make this initiative necessary. It was with disbelief and shock that we learned about the Taliban edict of 26 February 2001, ordering the destruction of all statues and non-Islamic shrines in Afghanistan. I was even more outraged when Taliban authorities announced that despite all international appeals and initiatives, the destruction of monuments and artefacts, particularly of the unique Buddhist sculptures in Bamiyan, had already begun.

The time we had to finalize this draft was extremely short. Nevertheless, 80 countries have signed the document and others have asked to co-sponsor the draft resolution. The following countries, not mentioned in the draft resolution before the Assembly, have also co-sponsored this draft resolution: Argentina, Slovenia, South Africa, Suriname and Thailand. I would like to thank all for their valuable contributions and considerable efforts that have helped shape the text presented today. I would also like to express my gratitude to all countries for the strong support we received during the last few days.

The systematic destruction of Buddhist statues and other elements of cultural heritage by the Taliban is unacceptable. We strongly condemn these acts of destruction as irresponsible acts of religious intolerance which will further isolate the Taliban. In view of the ongoing famine and the increasing misery

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of the people in Afghanistan, we appeal to the Taliban not to ignore the will of the international community and not to reject the unanimous vote of Member States of the United Nations.

One of the Buddhist statues in Bamiyan is the size of the Statue of Liberty in New York. The statues have survived 1,500 years of history. Successive Islamic Afghan Governments have preserved these masterpieces for 14 centuries. One thousand five hundred years ago, the Bamiyan valley, where the Buddhas stand today, was an important point on the trade route between China and India, in a part of Asia where languages and religions — Buddhism, Hinduism and, later, Islam — coexisted. It was also home to a great and famous Buddhist monastic centre. In recent days I have learned that the destruction of these Buddhas would also be a catastrophe for scholars of Asian art. Apart from Bamiyan's rarity as one of the few places having examples of monumental Buddhist sculpture, it also holds a key to countless questions about how Buddhism developed internally and how it influenced other cultures in Asia.

Islam is not only one of the word's most important religions, it is also one of the most sophisticated civilizations. The Islamic heritage brought the world irreplaceable works of art, science and philosophy. It is the centuries-old spirit of wisdom and tolerance of Islam and the Muslim world which deserves our respect and admiration. The destruction of the statues in Bamiyan is the opposite of this spirit. It is barbarism; barbarism that not only destroys the cultural heritage of humanity, but also does harm to Islam and to the Islamic world. It bears the danger that this religion, known for its values of tolerance and respect for all civilizations, could be perceived erroneously in some parts of the world and not as it is in reality.

Germany fully supports all efforts and initiatives taken by States, international organizations or private institutions, in particular the efforts made by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, to safeguard the sculptures in Afghanistan. In the draft resolution that will be adopted today we offer the help of the international community to safeguard the sculptures, including, if necessary, their temporary relocation or removal from public view. My country has already declared its general readiness to assist in such an international endeavour.

The adoption of this draft resolution is of vital importance. It shows the Taliban leadership the unity of the international community in condemning unanimously the destruction. We still have some hope that the demolition of the Buddhas and other relics and artefacts in Afghanistan has not yet been completed. We therefore strongly urge the Taliban to rescind their edict, to stop its implementation and to take immediate actions to prevent the further destruction of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. I hope that we are not too late with our appeal.

In concluding, I would like to mention that Germany fully subscribes to the statement of the European Union that is going to be presented by the Swedish Ambassador.

Mr. Schori (Sweden): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. The Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union — Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia — and the associated countries Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, as well as the European Free Trade Association countries members of the European Economic Area — Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway — align themselves with this statement.

First of all, I should like to thank the President for convening this important meeting at such short notice.

It was with dismay and shock that the European Union (EU) received last week information about the edict of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, in which the destruction of all statues and shrines in Afghanistan was ordered. Furthermore, the EU was appalled to learn last Sunday from Taliban authorities that the destruction of artefacts had indeed already begun.

The artefacts in Afghanistan are of priceless historic value. Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage is of vital importance not only to Afghanistan, but to the world as a whole. The EU strongly urges the Taliban leadership to take immediate action to prevent further destruction of the irreplaceable relics, which will deprive the people of Afghanistan and the international community of this rich cultural heritage.

The EU strongly condemns this deeply tragic decision by the Taliban. It urges the Taliban to revoke this decision and to show the spirit of tolerance

enjoined by Islam as well as respect for international sentiment in this regard.

The EU welcomes and fully supports the draft resolution now before us, which we are confident will be adopted by consensus.

Mr. Bazel (Afghanistan): Over the years, we have heard of Taliban barbarism against living beings, such as acts of summary execution; ethnic cleansing; gender apartheid; the forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of innocent people; the separation of women from their menfolk; the torching and levelling of houses; and the destruction of irrigation systems, canals, orchards and means of subsistence, systematically carried out by the Pakistan-Taliban-bin Laden triangle in the occupied parts of Afghanistan.

Yet, events during the past two weeks in those occupied parts reveal a new dimension to the dark and ominous undertakings of the Pakistan-Taliban-bin Laden triangle: namely, cultural genocide. The triangle began its campaign of cultural genocide through the burning of thousands of ancient Persian manuscripts, an act that was condemned by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the destruction of paintings by the renowned and respected miniaturist Professor Mashal in Herat; as well as the banning of the Persian New Year's first day of Naoroz, celebrated in Afghanistan for thousands of years. Likewise, pursuant to its hatred of the rich culture of the Persian-speaking Afghans, the triangle banned the use of the Persian language, which has been the lingua franca of Afghanistan for centuries, as the working language in areas under occupation.

Additionally, the triangle has embarked on a policy of social engineering with the aim of changing the demographic composition of various provinces of Afghanistan through the relocation and dislocation of the native inhabitants of central and northern parts of Afghanistan in order to disturb the harmonious fraternal coexistence of Afghan ethnic groups, which has endured for hundreds of years. This represents an arbitrary plan by the triangle to engulf Afghanistan in the flames of ethnic hatred and ethnic cleansing.

In line with the policy of cultural genocide, Mullah Omar, Pakistan's puppet and the Taliban's chieftain, issued a decree on 26 February 2001 ordering the demolition of pre-Islamic relics in Afghanistan. This constitutes barbarism against non-living beings, while the Taliban has already mastered barbarism against living beings. This infamous decree — lunatic, ludicrous and amply reflective of a pre-planned, diabolical scheme by the ruling Pakistani junta, the main force behind the Talibanization of the region — is aimed at the annihilation of the historical and cultural identity of Afghanistan.

Joining the international community's outcry, the Islamic State of Afghanistan strongly condemned the issuance of this despicable decree and the subsequent destruction of statues, which is definitely anti-Islamic, anti-cultural and anti-Afghan.

We are firmly convinced that the main responsibility for any damage to or plundering of Afghan cultural property caused by the so-called decree lies with the military junta of Pakistan. Pakistan's direct involvement in the actual fighting in Afghanistan is a fact now well known to the international community. It is also a well-established fact that Pakistan is the main source of indoctrination of religious extremism in our part of the world. Pakistan has been using extremist religious groups for its expansionist and hegemonic purposes in the region.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his report of November 2000 on the situation in Afghanistan, indicated that there is a significant number of non-Afghans, essentially from Pakistan, alongside the Taliban. Not only are Pakistanis involved in the fighting alongside the Taliban, but, in fact, Pakistan's high-ranking officers are engaged in the planning and logistical support of Taliban military operations on the battlefields of Afghanistan. The Pakistani military junta is directly accountable for actions and crimes committed in the occupied parts of Afghanistan.

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which prohibits any requisitioning, theft, pillage, vandalism, misappropriation or reprisal directed against cultural property, must be respected by the Pakistani military junta. Likewise, the Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 consider as a grave breach — that is, as a crime — any acts of hostility directed against historic monuments, works of art or places of worship which constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of people.

The Islamic State of Afghanistan, gravely concerned about the fate of two ancient Buddha statues in Bamiyan, had already contacted UNESCO and

requested, in letters dated 22 April 1997 and 12 November 1999, the recognition of the Bamiyan statues as part of the world cultural patrimony. Such recognition by UNESCO of a historical monument could have provided special protection. We were dismayed when we did not receive any response. It is questionable to what extent the acceptance of such a request would have provided the required protection for the statues against the evil intentions of vandalism emanating from the dark-minded obscurantism of the Taliban.

These pre-Islamic statues have been preserved as a national patrimony by successive Islamic Governments in Afghanistan for 14 centuries. The destruction of the Bamyan statues is a crime not only against history, art and humanity, but also against peace and stability in the world. Indeed, if communal and sectarian violence in different parts of the world follow this shameful act by the Pakistani-Taliban alliance, this will constitute a threat to international peace and security.

The Islamic State of Afghanistan and the Afghan nation attach great importance to the cultural property of Afghanistan, which they consider as being of fundamental cultural value to them. We would like to avail ourselves of this occasion to launch an appeal to UNESCO to help us prepare an inventory of all objets d'art, monuments, pieces, archives, manuscripts, documents and any other cultural or artistic treasures. The establishment of a committee for the return of the cultural property of Afghanistan or the restitution of such property in case of criminal appropriation could play an important part in endeavours to preserve, or to ensure the restitution of, Afghanistan cultural property.

Most of the looting and theft that occurred at the Kabul Museum happened after April 1992, when the site of the museum was occupied by the Pakistani-Hekmatyar alliance. Nasirullah Baber, the former Minister of the Interior of Pakistan — considered by many Pakistani media as the father of the Taliban — and Mr. Zardari, the husband of the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, among many others, have been involved in the theft and smuggling of Afghan artefacts.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize the following.

First, the Charter of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in its preamble stipulates:

> "Resolved to preserve Islamic spiritual, ethical, social and economic values".

On the basis of this disposition, the OIC should break its silence and clearly spell out its position regarding the words and deeds of the Taliban, practised under the holy name of Islam.

Secondly, the countries which have recognized the Taliban as the legitimate, bona fide government of Afghanistan have not only legitimized the occupation of parts of Afghanistan by an international network of terrorists, but have also acquiesced to the Taliban's religious interpretations. It is time that these countries withdrew their recognition from the so-called emirate of the Taliban, which represents not only an aberration from Afghan moderation and civility, but also an affront to the Afghan character. In addition, in light of its ignorant views and obscurantism, that group has distorted the image of Islam.

Thirdly, the international community and the United Nations should bring strong pressure to bear on Pakistan, as the ideological centre of Taliban internationalism, to put an end to its aggressive and hegemonic designs in the region; to withdraw its military personnel from Afghanistan; and to close down Taliban production factories, or so-called *madrassas* — religious schools — in which bigotry, hatred for humanity and religious intolerance are inculcated.

Mr. Satoh (Japan): On behalf of the Government of Japan, I would like to add my voice to the appeals made by the international community for the preservation of the historical statues and monuments of Afghanistan. In this context, I would like to express our sincere appreciation to Germany for the initiative it has taken to prepare the draft resolution before us.

Japan deplores the destruction of the historical statues and monuments of Afghanistan, as called for in the edict issued by the Taliban. They are truly the common heritage of all humankind.

We are further saddened to learn that the destruction has begun, in defiance of the broad appeals voiced by the international community, including the Secretary-General, the Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Recently we have been encouraged by the positive steps the Taliban has taken in response to appeals from the international community in sharply curtailing the cultivation of opium poppies and in providing women with at least some access to education and health care. We are therefore all the more disappointed over the destruction of these priceless objects.

It is indeed ironic that this edict was issued during this United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, during which the international community is to reconfirm the spirit of tolerance and respect for cultural and religious differences. This notion of tolerance and respect is embraced by all the major religions of the world, including Islam. I therefore would like to call on the Taliban to stop the destruction and show tolerance for these historical statues and monuments. Peoples in all parts of the world are waiting for a sign that the Taliban is ready to do so.

It is important for the General Assembly to adopt this urgently needed draft resolution by consensus, before the Secretary-General leaves for the region today. In addition, I would like to ask you, Mr. President, to convey this draft resolution, together with the record of today's meeting, directly to the Taliban authorities through whatever means are available to you.

Before concluding my statement, I would like briefly to touch on the issue of humanitarian aid to people suffering in and outside of Afghanistan. As vividly documented recently by the newly appointed Under-Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs, the combined effects of war and natural disasters have caused the Afghan people unspeakable suffering. I wish to stress the need for the international community to address this situation immediately.

Mr. De Saram (Sri Lanka): I have the honour, on behalf of Sri Lanka, to convey appreciation and gratitude to the delegation of Germany for all that Ambassador Kastrup and his colleagues at the Permanent Mission of Germany have done to ensure that the General Assembly urgently considers today the subject of the preservation of the statues of the Buddha on the cliffs of Bamiyan. For his very thoughtful introduction of the draft resolution before us, I thank Ambassador Kastrup. It is a draft resolution of which Sri Lanka is honoured to be a sponsor.

There is today an extraordinary uniqueness in our gathering in the General Assembly. It is to the General Assembly — in its universality of membership, concerns and responsibilities — that the world comes with its great troubles, its sorrows, its anxieties and its hopes; and it is the General Assembly that — through its discussions, exchanges of views and formal resolutions — provides solace, if not always solutions, to millions around the world.

The statues of Bamiyan are of the Buddha, but it is Germany, not a predominantly Buddhist country, that has brought to the General Assembly its proposed draft resolution on the preservation of the statues of the Buddha. The sponsors of the draft resolution include numerous delegations of countries where the other great religions of humanity are principally followed.

Those who now stand in Bamiyan before the statues of the Buddha are of ancient tribes — ancient tribes that have impressed millions over the centuries with their courage in battles with the hordes that came through their valleys not in peace but in war. Yet we are told that these present-day warriors wish to destroy the statutes of the Buddha, though it was the Buddha who taught us that the greatest warrior of all is he who conquers himself.

The words of the Buddha moved the warrior emperor Asoka, three centuries before the Christian era, to turn from the violence of war to the non-violence of peace. And it was the same emperor Asoka who then sent his son Mahinda and his daughter Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka with the teachings of the Buddha. The daughter, Sanghamitta, brought with her to Sri Lanka, when she came, a sapling of the sacred Bo tree under which the Buddha, centuries earlier, had sat in thought and in meditation on the unhappiness and sufferings of humanity and on how from such unhappiness and sufferings there may, through enlightenment, be release. The sapling, now the sacred Bo tree in the world heritage city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, still stands and is loved in reverence by all the people of Sri Lanka, be they Buddhists or followers of the other great religions of our land — Christianity, Hinduism and Islam.

We in this Hall today can only hope and pray that the statues in Bamiyan are not, and will not be, destroyed in a cruel, massive, wanton destruction of shocking magnitude. Yet we can make sure that within the United Nations, at its Headquarters here, every

endeavour is made to consider in what ways all statues, monuments, objects and places of religion or spirituality that form such a valuable component of the civilization of humanity can be preserved and treasured by humanity always. I would like to conclude by saying that the delegation of Sri Lanka hopes, in preparing for the next regular session of the General Assembly, to consult with other delegations on how best we might in that connection proceed.

The draft resolution in the document before us has, of course, Sri Lanka's wholehearted support. Finally, I assure the Assembly that the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka are continuing to do all that they possibly can with a view to the preservation of the statues in Afghanistan.

Mr. Dorji (Bhutan): The people and the Government of Bhutan are deeply distressed at the deliberate destruction by the Taliban of the centuries-old statues of the Buddha in the Bamiyan province of Afghanistan. We consider the unique Buddha statues of Bamiyan to be not only a priceless heritage of the Afghan people but also a common heritage of humankind. We strongly condemn the destruction of the Buddha statues and other relics and monuments by the Taliban and reiterate our call to the Taliban to revoke their edict of 26 February 2001 and to put an end to such wanton destruction.

Buddhism is an integral part of my country's heritage. We live by the Buddhist principles of peace, tolerance and compassion. We place the highest priority on the preservation of our rich Buddhist culture and tradition. At the same time, we respect other beliefs, religions and ways of life. This is an essential tenet if we are to live as civilized beings in harmony and peace with other nations. We are therefore deeply appalled by the Taliban's edict ordering the destruction of the Buddha statues and by the ongoing acts of such destruction. It has deeply hurt the sentiments of our people.

There cannot be any rational explanation for this irresponsible act. *The New York Times* of 3 March carried a story about appeals made to the Taliban by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and by other countries and dignitaries. In the article, Holland Cotter quotes from the Koran:

> "I do not serve what you worship; nor do you serve what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine."

As he pointed out,

> "This terse statement of live-and-let-live religious tolerance is from the Koran."

Hence, the Taliban acts appear to be totally un-Islamic and cannot be supported by anyone.

With regard to the General Assembly's consideration this morning of draft resolution A/55/L.79, my delegation would like to thank the delegation of Germany for taking the initiative to prepare the draft resolution. We are happy to co-sponsor it, and we call for its adoption by consensus. In this regard, we would also like to place on record our appreciation to the Secretary-General for his efforts.

Appeals to the Taliban have been made from all quarters. However, the Taliban seem to have thrown all reason and sense of justice, tolerance and respect for others to the wind, and appear to be bent upon carrying out their senseless destructive acts to the end. With the collective appeal of the international community as expressed in this draft resolution, we hope the Taliban will choose to listen to reason and sanity and respect the call for an end to the destruction of the priceless statues of Bamiyan and other relics and monuments.

Mr. Sharma (India): We are grateful to you, Mr. President, for arranging this meeting so expeditiously, and to the German delegation, led by Ambassador Kastrup, for taking the initiative to prepare the draft resolution and mobilizing support for it in such a short time.

We meet to discuss actions that in the twenty-first century should have been unthinkable. Afghanistan has through history stood at the crossroads of civilizations, and it bears their imprint in great measure across its length and breadth. The relics of these civilizations, including the towering Bamiyan Buddhas, stand witness to the pride of the Afghan people in their tradition.

The Taliban edict constitutes an assault not only on Afghan tradition, but on the common heritage of mankind and the very idea of civilized living. It once again profiles the Taliban's bigoted and obscurantist ideologies and recalls its earlier decrees, such as the 1998 decree which required a minority in Afghan

society to wear a distinctive piece of clothing or put a distinctive mark on their bodies so that they could be easily distinguished.

It also demonstrates, yet again, that destruction is the Taliban's only creed. They have destroyed ethnic harmony in Afghanistan; they have strangled the desire of Afghan girls and women for education; they have pulverized the homes and means of livelihood of a large number of its people; and they have ruthlessly trampled upon the human rights of Afghans.

In the face of universal outrage and despite protests and appeals against taking such a step, the Taliban are launched upon committing a grievous misdeed, indeed, a sacrilege against humanity, against the civilizational and cultural inheritance of all mankind, by starting to destroy the incomparable and unique statues of Buddha at Bamiyan, celebrated over almost two millennia. It is, indeed, deeply tragic and a cause for anguish that this act of cultural vandalism, the most extreme among the many other acts of destruction of statues, artefacts and archaeological treasures of Afghanistan, is being perpetrated despite a universal outcry against it. That it is being perversely undertaken in the name of a noble religion makes it even more reprehensible.

The intent to destroy the Bamiyan Buddha should be seen not as an impulsive act, but in keeping with a policy of cultural nihilism that seeks to erase its cultural past from Afghanistan, that crossroads of Asian history and palimpsest of succeeding civilizations. It is to create a nullity of one of the most written-upon pages in world history, a destruction of the patrimony of a whole people, an act before our eyes in the twenty-first century such as those we thought we had for ever left behind. A refugee resident from Kabul has been quoted as observing, "We have lost everything — our economic system and our political system. The only thing we had left was our history. It is like destroying our only hope as Afghans".

This latest unspeakable affront to our idea of civilization, on which we seek to stimulate a dialogue within this house, is part of the effort to wipe out the civilizational memory of a people. Ai Khanoum, the second-century to fourth-century B.C. Greek city in the northern province of Takhar, a relic of the days of Alexander the Great, has been systematically plundered. At the country's most famous site — Hadda, near Jalalabad, a second-century to seventh-century stupa and monastery complex renowned for its Graeco-Roman sculpture — every statue has been looted. The Kabul Museum, which reflected in its collection cultural influences from a number of sources rarely matched in history — Persian, Mongol, Chinese, Greek, Roman and even Mesopotamian civilizations, and unique in terms of the enlightenment of the art of its period — stands plundered, despoiled and bereft.

The Museum contained the ivories of Begram, the stucco of Hadda, painted clay figures from Bamiyan, bronzes and marble from the Ghaznavid, works in wood from Nuristan, ancient Greek coins, glazed pottery of Hellenistic technique and Indian design, masks of gold repoussé and bronzes of Greek horsemen. Among the losses from the museum is the throne that was a centrepiece of the Begram ivories; pieces of it are scattered and it has ceased to exist. What we are seeing before our eyes is the annihilation of everything that is uniquely Afghan — its extraordinary diversity.

This regression into mindless medieval barbarism in Afghanistan under the Taliban is precisely what India, among many other countries, has been cautioning the world against for so long. The international community has unequivocally condemned and rejected the Taliban's ideological orientations, which have been responsible for the Taliban territories emerging as the world's principal centre of international terrorism, illicit drugs and violation of human rights, principally those of women.

The destruction of the giant statues of the Buddha, the embodiment of compassion, enlightenment and peace, is the symptom of a much greater threat and challenge. In emulating infamous regimes that destroyed every vestige of received value, experience and meaning, the Taliban are bent on policies that will result in the annihilation of the rich mosaic of cultures that is Afghanistan. An observer of this carnage has said, "The damage is not just physical and material; the soul and spiritual well-being of Afghans has been under constant attack".

Even at this late stage, we would like to send out an appeal insisting that the destruction of the incomparable manifestations of the shared cultural heritage of mankind must stop. If the Taliban do not wish to retain this inheritance, our Government has announced that we would be happy to arrange for the transfer of all these artefacts to India, where they

would be kept safely and preserved for all mankind, in the full knowledge and clear understanding that they are, in the first place and above all, treasures of the Afghan people themselves.

In the face of this utter disregard of the Taliban for Afghanistan's precious and irreplaceable heritage, which is one of the high points in the cultural history of our region, and, in this Year of Dialogue among Civilizations its disdain for the international protests and appeals over the destruction of artefacts that are not only magnificent creations of an ancient civilization, but objects of reverence for Buddhists world-wide, the international community's collective message today must be one of unequivocal, strong and clear condemnation and a call for the immediate cessation of this act of destruction.

Mr. Estévez-López (Guatemala) (*spoke in Spanish*): My Government feels deep and special concern over the situation that the draft resolution before us, of which we have the honour of being one of the sponsors, seeks to correct, or at least to attenuate.

We wish to explain briefly the reasons for this feeling.

As is widely known, Guatemala is privileged and proud to possess sites and monuments that constitute archaeological and historical treasures belonging to the cultural heritage of humanity. Three of these localities are on the list of properties that, as part of this heritage, are covered by the important Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 1972 and to which Guatemala is a party — together, I might point out, with Afghanistan, since 1979. One of these sites is a beautiful, partly ruined colonial metropolis. The other two, which are far more ancient, are architectural complexes dating back to the first millennium of the Christian era. These archaeological treasures, which the national authorities do their best to protect, have been increasing in number over the years as a result of excavations carried out in different parts of our territory.

It is thus absolutely incomprehensible to us that, in this day and age, the mind of a human being could entertain the senseless idea of destroying, in cold blood and for reasons having nothing to do with public utility, archaeological monuments whose value to humanity resides not only in their artistic merits and historical interest, but also in the venerability they derive from their association with one of the most ancient religions in the world.

These are not, however, the only reasons why we are so deeply shocked by the possibility that humanity will lose forever the magnificent monuments whose destruction has been contemplated. This tragic possibility reminds us of the losses that our own archaeological heritage has suffered and continues to suffer as a result of acts of vandalism and of depredations committed by individuals who place their desire for gain and selfishness ahead of the interest of humankind.

For these reasons, as well as the ones put forward by those who have spoken before us, we earnestly hope that the addressees of the appeal contained in the draft resolution before us will not only heed that call, but will do so in the firm conviction that the principles of civilization on which it is based are unquestionably well-founded.

Mr. Aboulgheit (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): Egypt has always been among the first United Nations Members calling for fruitful and useful dialogue among civilizations to promote mutual understanding and establish contacts leading to constructive coexistence and serving humanity in every possible way.

On that basis, I speak before the General Assembly today to reaffirm our concern and to support all those who have expressed their dismay at the continued deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan, a country that witnessed humanity's first attempts to establish a dialogue between East and West through contacts first explored by the ancient Greeks with lands in Central Asia and the subcontinent. We are disturbed by the suffering of ordinary citizens in that country, which has been overwhelmed by internal disputes and civil war.

In the midst of this suffering, the recent developments under discussion today have further deepened the international community's concern about possible damage to human civilization and its heritage. In this respect, we wish to reaffirm the following points.

First, the religion of Islam arose as an international message calling for education and enlightenment to emancipate people's minds from falsehood and time-worn traditions. Islam did not arise

to destroy or to launch aggression against the cultural heritage of other nations and religions.

Secondly, the historical heritage of the various civilizations belongs to all humanity, which should seek to safeguard and to ensure its continuity as a witness to earlier civilizations. We cannot accept a theory that calls for harming other civilizations, relics and religions.

While the international community is strenuously striving to help the Afghan people, who are daily dying by the hundreds under harsh weather conditions, extreme drought and intense infighting among various factions, we are now challenged by the edict to destroy non-Islamic relics in Afghanistan. The first consequence of this edict is to distract the international community's attention from the need to provide relief to the Afghan people, while concentrating its efforts on saving the country's cultural heritage at the expense of saving lives in peril there.

We call on the General Assembly to adopt the draft resolution before us without a vote so as to send a strong message from the international community that it is vitally important to put an end to the tragic situation in that brotherly country, which needs all our help in overcoming its desperate condition. Egypt takes this opportunity to call once again upon the international community to strive to find an immediate solution to the problem of Afghan refugees and to enable them voluntarily to return to their homes and to enjoy their right to life in peaceful and stable conditions. We call on all belligerent Afghan factions to heed the voice of wisdom and conscience by according higher priority to the interests of their country than to their narrow personal interests. They should refrain from taking any action that could cast a poor light on Islam. They should respond positively to the call of the international community to refrain from destroying any cultural heritage and monument of Afghanistan.

Egypt believes that the destruction of any human or religious monument or relic in any country, civilization or society cannot but foment deeper doubts and greater misunderstandings. We take this opportunity to express our appreciation for the efforts of the Secretary-General and his Personal Representative for Afghanistan to persuade all parties to initiate a process of dialogue and to seek a peaceful solution to the Afghan issue.

Mr. Sun Joun-yung (Republic of Korea): I would first like to take this opportunity to extend my appreciation to you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting, and to the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany for its efforts to prepare a draft resolution aimed at preventing the historic statues of Buddha in Afghanistan from being destroyed by the Taliban decree. I believe that the draft resolution merits the support of all of us, for it seeks to preserve the cultural, historical and religious heritage of all humankind.

The Buddha statues in Afghanistan, including the great Bamiyan Buddha statues, are a rarity, as they are one of the few examples of monumental Buddhist sculpture. They are also an important part of the cultural heritage of one of the world's oldest religions. Furthermore, they may hold the key to historical facts about the development of Buddhism in Asia. Hence, the Buddha statues in Afghanistan must be preserved as an irreplaceable part of the cultural heritage of mankind.

We are required, as members of the international community, to take the necessary and appropriate measures and actions to protect the historical artefacts in Afghanistan. In this regard, we commend the efforts made so far by the international community, in particular the measures being taken by the Secretary-General and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to stop this outrage.

President Kim Dae-jung of the Republic of Korea, in his message dated 3 March 2001 addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly, expressed his deepest concern over the Taliban decree and called for a prompt end to its systematic acts of destruction. At the same time, he expressed his wholehearted support for the measures taken by the Secretary-General and UNESCO, and called upon the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly to take the appropriate actions to keep Afghanistan's cultural relics from being devastated. He also affirmed that the Republic of Korea would fully participate in the efforts of the international community to protect the common heritage of mankind.

With this in mind, the Republic of Korea fully supports the draft resolution before us.

Mr. Khalid (Pakistan): Pakistan shares the concern of the international community over the reported decision by the Afghan Government to destroy some historic artefacts in Afghanistan. We attach great importance to the preservation of the world's archaeological, historical, cultural and religious heritage. We have joined others in appealing to the Afghan Government to take measures to fully protect Afghanistan's historical monuments, sites, statues and artefacts, which are a part of the world's cultural heritage. We have used diplomatic channels in Islamabad and in Kabul to try to persuade the Afghan Government to reconsider its decision.

Pakistan fully subscribes to the Millennium Summit Declaration in support of the principles of tolerance and respect for diverse faith and values. Moreover, respect for other religions and for their beliefs is enjoined upon Muslims. We, along with other Muslim countries, have been urging the Afghan Government to show the spirit of tolerance promoted by Islam as well as respect for international sentiments in this regard.

While we will continue to urge the Afghan Government to rescind its edict, we would also request the international community, for a moment, to ponder why the Taliban has resorted to such drastic measures. Are these the symptoms of desperation brought on by international denunciation and the ostracising of the Afghan Government? This behaviour can be explained only as a form of reaction against the international condemnation faced by the Taliban. If we truly want it to change its behaviour to accord with established norms, we must use persuasion, not intimidation. We must engage with it, rather than disengage. We must try to convince rather than to rebuff. If we must condemn the Taliban for its misdeeds, we must also consider commending it for its achievements, as in the case of the recent destruction of the poppy crop in Taliban-controlled territory, which has been done at the peril of Afghan farmers.

Although historic relics are indeed important, we believe that human lives are also, if not more, important. Afghanistan is presently in the grip of a grave humanitarian crisis. In the midst of a harsh winter, 700,000 Afghan civilians have now been internally displaced, and another 170,000 refugees have crossed into Pakistan. Coming after decades of war and in the midst of an unprecedented drought situation, the sanctions recently imposed under Security Council resolution 1333 (2000) were the final straw. We are witnessing a crisis of monumental proportions.

While the United Nations has been resolute in taking action against the Taliban on a number of issues, we have not even begun to address the present unfortunate situation. Nor have we even seriously begun to consider the bigger picture — that is, the restoration of peace in, and the reconstruction of, Afghanistan. Failing that, there will be no end to the cycle of misery of the Afghan people, or, indeed, to those matters which cause consternation among the international community.

Mr. Nejad Hosseinian (Islamic Republic of Iran): Allow me at the outset to extend to you, Mr. President, my delegation's appreciation for convening this special meeting of the General Assembly on an issue of great importance to Member States and to the international community.

It is very unfortunate that in the year proclaimed by the General Assembly as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, a part of the cultural heritage of humanity in Afghanistan faces the danger of destruction by the Taliban militia. Afghanistan, as a country situated on the ancient Silk Road, bears the imprints of many great ancient civilizations that came into contact in the land of Afghanistan and created a unique and rich cultural heritage. The relics of that cultural heritage, including statues belonging to the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras of Afghan civilization, bear testimony to the rich Afghan culture and should be preserved.

The attempts under way following the decree issued by the Taliban leadership of Afghanistan to destroy the ancient relics in Bamiyan are in line with a number of other acts perpetrated by the Taliban in recent years that run counter to all the basic principles of respect, tolerance and wisdom upon which Islam is based. Islam fought against and refuted idol worship. But it is out of obscurantism and narrow-mindedness that the artistic creativity of humankind, as manifested in sculptures, paintings, et cetera, is associated with the concept of idol worship. There is no doubt that international public opinion will rightly blame the wanton act of destroying the ancient artefacts on the rigid-minded Taliban and their sympathizers.

The Taliban have already imposed untold suffering and hardship on the Afghan people by

refusing to engage in a meaningful peace process aimed at a peaceful settlement of the Afghan crisis. Their involvement in drug-trafficking and terrorist activities has already caused great harm to the Afghan people, as well as to neighbouring countries and beyond. Moreover, in areas controlled by the Taliban, Afghans, particularly women and girls, are also subject to harsh restrictions and inhuman treatment that are entirely alien to the compassionate teachings of Islam. The new act they are engaged in — namely, the destruction of the cultural heritage of Afghanistan — constitutes a new blow to what humanity holds dear. If left unchecked, this new path may result in depriving the Afghan people of the treasure of their heritage and glorious past. Undoubtedly, the perpetrators of such an irreparable act would bear heavy responsibility before the Afghan people and history, and would lose further credibility with public opinion and with the international community.

We still hope that the Taliban leadership will reconsider and rescind its decision in a way that will allow the Afghan historical heritage to be preserved for the benefit of present and future generations. We therefore believe that the efforts being made by the international community to convince the Taliban not to go ahead with the planned destruction are worthwhile and should continue with greater energy.

We are pleased to co-sponsor draft resolution A/55/L.79, which highlights the international community's concern at the latest senseless decision by the Taliban. We hope that the clear message contained in this draft resolution, which is sponsored by some 80 Member States, will be heard by the Taliban. I would also like to place on record our appreciation to the Permanent Representative of Germany and his colleagues for the timely and excellent work they did in carrying out the consultations for this draft resolution and drafting it.

Mr. Jayanama (Thailand): On behalf of my Government, I should like to express my appreciation to you, Mr. President, for convening this plenary meeting to discuss an issue that is of great significance not only to my country, Thailand, but also to Afghanistan itself and, indeed, to the Islamic and international communities. We would also like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to Germany for taking the initiative in preparing the timely draft resolution before us on the destruction of relics and monuments in Afghanistan (A/55/L.79). Thailand is a sponsor of the draft resolution and hopes that it will be adopted by consensus.

I believe that we are gathered here today with shared sentiments of great sadness and grave concern at the recent turn of events in Afghanistan. As a predominantly Buddhist country, Thailand and the Thai people are saddened at the edict issued by the Taliban leaders to demolish the two massive and ancient Buddha statues in Bamiyan province in Afghanistan, as well as other invaluable historical artefacts throughout the country. We are outraged at the continuing acts of destruction taking place as we speak, despite the unanimous chorus of pleas, protests and condemnation from the international community. What is being destroyed represents not only the sacred symbol for Buddhists around the world but also an invaluable part of Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage, and indeed of the common cultural heritage of mankind. It is truly incredible that such destructive acts can occur in this modern era of enlightenment and tolerance.

But we are also gathered here in a common sense of purpose to bring together the weight of the international community in expressing our universal condemnation of the destruction of Afghanistan's, and the world's, priceless cultural heritage, and to take the necessary steps together to protect what remains. The draft resolution before us seeks to achieve this. Ultimately, the draft resolution calls on all members of the international community to uphold the principle of respect for cultural diversity, which is the bedrock of the United Nations and its institutions, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Thailand therefore extends its full support to this draft resolution and calls on Member States to give it universal support. It is our hope that the enhanced intensity of international condemnation will help stop and prevent further destruction of relics, monuments and artefacts in Afghanistan. We also appeal to those who are influential with the Taliban leaders to play their part to help protect what remains of one important part of Afghanistan's cultural heritage and of the common cultural heritage of mankind.

As the Permanent Representative of Germany said in his introduction of the draft resolution, we also hope that our appeal is not too late.

Mr. Krokhmal (Ukraine): Ukraine aligns itself with the statement made by the Ambassador of Sweden

on behalf of the European Union and associated countries earlier this morning.

In this connection, we once again affirm our resolute condemnation of the edict issued by the Taliban leadership, ordering the destruction of non-Islamic historic monuments, and we call on it to revoke it. Ukraine maintains that it is a flagrant violation of international law, in particular of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. We highly value UNESCO's efforts to protect Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage.

Ukraine welcomes the General Assembly draft resolution on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security. My delegation has been a strong supporter of this draft resolution, and we expect that it will be unanimously adopted. It is also fitting for us to pay tribute to the German delegation, which played a central role in its preparation.

Mr. Bhattarai (Nepal): The Buddha statues and related shrines in Afghanistan, as eloquently illustrated by the preceding speakers this morning, constitute invaluable treasures of world cultural heritage. It is therefore the duty of the international community to show collective responsibility at a time of imminent threat to the existence of this heritage. On behalf of His Majesty's Government of Nepal, I would like to extend our deep appreciation to you, Mr. President, for today's plenary meeting on short notice.

Deeply shocked by the recent Taliban edict and actions to destroy the historic Buddha statues in the Bamiyan province of Afghanistan, His Majesty's Government and the people of Nepal have called upon all peace-loving peoples and Governments around the world for collective diplomatic representation in an effort to preserve and safeguard the statues. In this regard, we appreciate the swift steps taken by the Secretary-General and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the face of this imminent cultural catastrophe.

It is in this very spirit that my delegation deeply commends Germany's initiative of presenting to the General Assembly the draft resolution relating to the destruction of relics and monuments in Afghanistan. Nepal is honoured to co-sponsor this draft resolution. We believe the draft resolution seeks to achieve the Taliban authorities' realization, before it is too late, of the deep significance of religious and cultural tolerance, to take immediate measures to reverse the destructive developments in Afghanistan and to ensure that the sanctity and the integrity of the statues of one of the greatest apostles of peace are not violated. With this belief, I appeal to the Assembly to adopt the draft resolution by consensus.

Mr. Neewoor (Mauritius): I thank you, Mr. President, for calling this important meeting of the General Assembly to discuss the draft resolution on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security.

My delegation is deeply concerned over the situation in Afghanistan, and at the same time expresses its dismay and disappointment over the Taliban's defiance of the international call to stop the destruction and elimination of all historic relics in Afghanistan. The decree by the Taliban regarding the destruction of all Buddhist statues, including two towering Buddhas nearly 2,000 years old, carved into the face of a cliff at Bamiyan in the Hindu Kush, presages a cultural catastrophe of world-wide significance.

My delegation appreciates the prompt action taken by the Secretary-General urging Taliban officials to abandon their plans for the destruction of all pre-Islamic relics in Afghanistan. We urge the Taliban to accept the offer of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art to send a team to remove the movable structures and sculptures from Afghanistan as a temporary measure. A similar offer has also been made by the Government of India. We hope that the Taliban will understand the utmost importance of cultural freedom, will respect the vestiges of civilizations that have stood the test of time through the ages and will desist from further destruction of its invaluable cultural heritage.

We highly appreciate the initiative of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, of sending Mr. Pierre Lafrance as his special envoy to Afghanistan to urge the Taliban authorities to reverse their decision to destroy the ancient statues of Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

My delegation strongly believes that the destruction of Buddhist monuments is a crime that cannot be justified by any Islamic concept. Islam has always preached tolerance and respect for all religions.

One of the verses of the Koran reads, "You believe in your religion and I believe in my religion". This has been the bedrock of the unity of Afghanistan's diverse and multi-ethnic people. By carrying out the decree, the Taliban are acting against this very precept of Islam, which they so actively claim to profess.

My delegation is also deeply concerned by the sufferings of the refugees and internally displaced persons. Recent information from northern Afghanistan indicates continuing deterioration in the conditions of displaced persons in the area as a result of constant conflict and drought. They are now most vulnerable to famine and malnutrition. We urge the Taliban to dedicate themselves to creating the right atmosphere so that the international community can come forward to assist in alleviating the suffering of the people of Afghanistan.

We commend the resilience and courage of the humanitarian workers in the midst of all odds and adversity. We extend to them our full support for their benevolent work. We urge the Taliban to allow humanitarian aid to flow without hindrance and to let the humanitarian agencies conduct their work without interference.

International peace and security, as we all know, are based on the thin fabric of understanding and mutual respect between nations, as well as respect for the religions and cultures of all the peoples of the world.

In this regard, tolerance of religions and cultural diversity within nations is the very foundation of stable societies and the pursuit of peaceful development. We urge the Taliban to adhere to these fundamental principles.

My delegation thanks the permanent mission of Germany for authoring this draft resolution, which has received the overwhelming support of United Nations Members and which Mauritius is co-sponsoring. Our presence is a manifestation of our solidarity and respect for human values based on righteousness, equality, justice and mutual respect.

Mr. Sun (Cambodia): On behalf of the Cambodian delegation, I wish to assert that the Kingdom of Cambodia and its people are deeply disturbed by the decision reportedly taken by the Taliban authorities in adopting and executing the anti-idol edict issued by its military leader, which has resulted in the destruction of pre-Islamic statues and other relics in Afghanistan, including the great 2,000-year-old statues of Buddha and the priceless Buddhist shrines in Bamiyan. So far, we have learned through the press reports that nearly one fourth of the two huge and incomparable sculptures of the ancient civilization in the province of Bamiyan has been destroyed. The intent to destroy the relics of that civilization, of which the Afghan people must be proud, is appalling at a time when all civilizations are coming together through the promotion of dialogue and shared values, gifted by the grace of tolerance and understanding among nations and cultures for the sake of the peace and prosperity of mankind.

In spite of the criticism and the protests from the world community against this act of cultural vandalism, the destruction is continuing. Cambodia shares the grave concern and the consternation of the international community and therefore strongly condemns such barbaric and sacrilegious acts of the Taliban leaders. To join the international effort, an appeal has already been made by our Prime Minister, our top religious leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs calling for an end to the destruction of the Buddha statues and other relics in Afghanistan.

We believe that the destruction of the pre-Islamic artefacts and, in particular, the two giant and unique statues of Buddha, which are the cultural heritage of mankind, is a great loss to Afghanistan. It is also an irreparable loss to humanity as a whole. We urge the Taliban authorities to reverse their current and uncivilized decision and to desist from this senseless destructive act.

Deploring such acts of vandalism, and in the fervent hope that the United Nations will take note of the severe impact of and strongly condemn the destruction of cultural heritage belonging to every nation and religion, Cambodia would like to join other Member States by being a sponsor of the present draft resolution, authored by the Government of Germany, to which we also extend our appreciation and gratitude.

Mr. Valdivieso (Colombia) (*spoke in Spanish*): Colombia supports and is a sponsor of the draft resolution that we will adopt later today under agenda item 46, entitled "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security".

We deeply regret the fact that the appeals made by the General Assembly in recent years in its

resolutions 53/203, 54/189 and 55/174 to the Taliban to protect the historical and cultural relics and monuments of their country, which are the common heritage of all mankind, have not been heeded.

Colombia condemns the irreparable destruction of the Buddhist statues in Bamiyan and other monuments and relics of Afghanistan, as ordered in the edict issued by the Taliban authorities on 26 February. We believe that decisions of that kind in no way benefit the people of Afghanistan, who are currently suffering an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, and that, on the contrary, such decisions betray religious intolerance at a time when the international community is seeking to foster dialogue among civilizations and to strengthen the principles of tolerance and respect for religious values and beliefs.

In this context, we urge the Taliban authorities to reconsider their decision and we join the international community's call for an immediate end to any attempt by the Taliban to continue their acts of barbarism and vandalism.

The President: We have heard the last speaker in the debate on this item.

I should like to announce that the following Member States have become sponsors of draft resolution A/55/L.79: Bolivia, Madagascar, Monaco, Peru, the Republic of Moldova, Sierra Leone, the Solomon Islands and Uzbekistan.

The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/55/L.79, entitled "The destruction of relics and monuments in Afghanistan".

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/55/L.79?

Draft resolution A/55/L.79 was adopted (resolution 55/243).

The President: The General Assembly has thus concluded this stage of its consideration of agenda item 46.

Programme of work

The President: I should like to inform members that the General Assembly will take up agenda item 166 — "Election of Judges of the International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since 1991" — on Wednesday, 14 March 2001, in the morning.

The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.